

# Jean Margaret Wemyss Laurence, 1926-1987

by Rudy Wiebe

Our earthly life begins with birth, it ends with death, and not one of us will escape either of these drastic, overwhelming events. But when Margaret Laurence died on January 5, we mourned not only the death of a good woman or a friend, we mourned the passing of a greatness from among us. It is the greatness of a creator that we mourn, the creator of the prairie world of Manawaka, the world of Hagar and Rachel and Stacey and Vanessa and Piquette and Morag, a world so like our own in the Canadian west that we continually stumble against it in delighted and sometimes consternated recognition — a world that is now known everywhere on the globe where English or French or Swedish or Italian or Dutch or German or Spanish or Norwegian is read. Margaret Laurence made this world; without her it would never have existed, and not one of us could ever have imagined it. Truly she gave us all a gift beyond imagining, and now we mourn for her.

*Grief brings us to memory.* Margaret Laurence did more than publish the five Manawaka novels in ten years (beginning in with *The Stone Angel* in 1964 and ending with *The Diviners* in 1974); before that she had already written four books about Africa, and when Alfred Knopf of New York published three of her books at once in 1964, she became a kind of international affirmation of Canadian creativity, of the marvelous artistic energy that swept Canada into its second century. She became godmother to an entire generation of writers — women writers, prairie writers, prose writers — whoever they were, anywhere in the country, they found in her a model and an encouragement.

In June 1971, I was in Toronto on business when I discovered that the author of *The Stone Angel*, which I had taught for

several years, was living for the summer on the Otonabee River, near Peterborough. On impulse I called her, and she instantly invited me over. Her work for the day (she was then writing *The Diviners*, but she just called it “the novel” and felt it was really getting very far out of hand) was over and we talked far into the night. Once we rowed out on the river in her small boat named “C.C. Grant;” sitting on her porch, she interpreted the song of a small bird that seemed to live there with her: when she told me, I could understand it easily. It would perch nearby, study her, then fly away over the countryside singing joyously, “Press... press... pres-byterian!”

The last time we talked was on October 6, 1986, when she telephoned me. Her voice was as powerful as ever, though she coughed dreadfully. “Every book I have written,” she said, “has been given me — it is a gift from God... I am a kind of half-assed Christian, I believe in the female principle of the Holy Spirit. And oh Rudy, my death is simple, it’s simple — I am most blessed among women. I have been given my life’s work to do and I’ve done it: I’ve lived my two wonderful kids into adulthood and I’ve written 15 books. What more could I want?”

*From memory we move to Hope, and Joy.* For this we must read what Margaret Laurence has written, as we and generations after us will certainly continue to read her. In 1979 she gave a talk at the Kingston United Church where her old friend from Winnipeg, Lois Wilson, was then pastor. She said, “The act of writing itself expresses some kind of faith and some kind of hope, and the very fact that the novelist is concerned deeply with the human individual and the preciousness, the value of the human individual is a kind

of religious faith... All my work is informed by hope. I don’t think any of it is optimistic. One would have to have a very simplistic, or very narrow, view of life to be optimistic in a world such as ours. Hope is different. Hope is something I couldn’t live without. And given God’s grace, somehow one feels the planet and its creatures will survive. I think of optimism as saying, ‘Everything’s fine.’ Only a fool could say that everything’s fine.”

One of Margaret Laurence’s favorite hymns, in spite of its masculine imagery, was, “All people that on earth do dwell.” She especially loved the line, “him serve with mirth,” and there is a beautiful scene at the end of *The Stone Angel* where Mr. Troy, the minister with his face “round and crimson as a harvest moon,” confronts the formidable, 90-year old Hagar on her hospital bed. He’s terrified of her, but at her command he sings:

*All people that on earth do dwell,  
Sing to the Lord with joyful voice.  
Him serve with mirth, His praise  
forth tell;*

*Come ye before Him and rejoice.*

And there on her deathbed Hagar makes this discovery:

*I would have wished it. Rejoice. This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that — simply to rejoice.*

Margaret Laurence was not Hagar Shipley. She could rejoice, and she did throughout her life. And we do too, here on this memorial occasion. We rejoice at the good life of this good woman, this great writer it was our ineffable privilege to know. And especially we rejoice at the unimaginable gifts of great fiction she gave us.